

What Shall We Do?

Acts 2:37-41

Pentecost, West Valley Pres, May 28, 2023

Out of all the astonishing miracles that happened on that first Pentecost – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that sounded like a windstorm and looked like flame, the speaking in different languages, the huge crowds attracted, the profoundly exegetical sermon delivered without preparation by a fisherman – there was at least one thing that happened that seems very ordinary to us. When the crowd asked Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”, Peter says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you.”

Now, baptism. We do know about that. Most likely we’ve experienced it at some point in our lives. So to us that sounds very ordinary. All the rest of the miracles at Pentecost sound a lot more miracle-y, don’t they? Compared to windstorms and flames and different languages and instant sermons, baptism seems pretty tame, right? I’m guessing that nearly all of us are already baptized, and it may have happened so early in your life that you don’t remember it. Right? But all of us have seen baptisms, whether they happen by sprinkling as in most Presbyterian churches, or by immersion in swimming pools, or creeks, or horse troughs, or baptistries, or maybe even in the Jordan river.

And repenting? We also know about that. That also sounds very ordinary; I guarantee that if you go to church regularly, you’ve experienced repentance. Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer we repent and ask for forgiveness. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”, right? Sometimes we pray more formal prayers of repentance, especially during Lent and Advent. And we’ve all prayed some version of “I’m sorry, God,” many times in our lives, because we all mess up. We all need to say we are sorry.

Repentance and baptism seem ordinary to us. But they did NOT seem ordinary to Peter! To Peter, they were staggering miracles of God’s grace and mercy! Verse 40 says, “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” He’s not saying, “It might be a good idea to repent and be baptized.” No! Peter is begging them: “You know you need to do something. You feel terrible about Jesus’ death. Here’s someone through whom God worked amazing miracles, someone whom God has endorsed as Lord and Messiah by raising him from the dead, and how did you react to him? Yeah, it wasn’t so great, was it? You need to repent. And you need to be baptized in Jesus’ name for the forgiveness of your sins.”

“Oh, and BTW,” says Peter, “if you do this? Then you’ll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the same as what you’re seeing right here today. And this isn’t just a one-time thing. Your children, and everyone who is far away, they are all included too. God is doing an amazing thing. It’s astonishing. And if you want to be included, you will be.”

How could anyone turn down an offer like that? 3000 people were added to their number on that day.

How many of you were here worshiping last week? If you were here, or if you were watching on Livestream, then you got a little taste of what it must have felt like at Pentecost. The music led us to rejoice before the Lord. The Scripture passages and the prayers reminded us of the joy of resurrection. And the testimonies that Dan and Carol shared – wow. If ever you feel like you need proof that God really is at work in our midst, right here and right now, then you go talk to either or both of them. As Dan shared in his testimony, he and all of us need to learn how God wants us to number our days – we’re none of us getting younger. And as Carol shared in her testimony, we all need to hear for ourselves how God works to bring amazing healing and restoration even in the midst of despair so terrible that it would drive someone to jump onto a freeway. Brothers and sisters, God really is doing amazing things in our midst. Not just 2000 years ago, but now. Today. We are SO BLESSED to be part of it. The Holy Spirit is present right here and right now! No flames, no languages, but he’s here! We felt it! Thank you, God!!!

And since it’s the Holy Spirit who makes baptism holy, who makes baptism a sacrament, then that means that repentance and baptism are miracles. Yes, they are familiar to us. But they are not ordinary. They are miracles. Repentance and baptism change our lives. God claims us for himself through baptism, and often we can see amazing results.

For example: I’d like to tell you about a man named Jeffrey Zehnder, who worked as a sexton for the Church of the 49ers in Columbia. I first met him at a community dinner that the church hosted every week, and he was a sight. His face was all battered and broken; he was missing some teeth; he had a broken arm; he needed a shower, and he was living in a tent in a field. He’d been working as a tree trimmer; but since he was an off-the-books kind of handyman, he had no safety gear, and he’d fallen out of a tree. One of the elders took Jeff under his wing, got him some medical care, and brought him to church. He liked the church and its people; he had a pit bull; and we needed a sexton for nighttime security. So he moved onto campus. It turned out that one of his foster parents had taken him to church as a teenager, and he’d been baptized then. God claimed Jeffrey then; and even though Jeff traveled far from God and got into a lot of trouble, he always knew that he belonged to Jesus. Which was why he turned to Jesus as an adult in need. Hanging around church folks and going to services got him really excited about Jesus. He reaffirmed his baptism in a worship service, and gave himself fully to the Lord.

That was a miracle. Here was a man who had run away from home at age 12, had lived in foster homes, had never graduated high school, and was a substance abuser. And he got and stayed clean, made many Christian friends, and gave other people a hand up. His joy in the Lord was so infectious! He was a constant reminder to all of us of what God can do with us, given half a chance. God claimed him through baptism; God never gave up on him; and God transformed him through the work of the Holy Spirit. And we got to see it with our own eyes. And let me tell you, it was amazing. Baptism in the name of Jesus has power that we may not even realize, at the time that it happens. Jesus has power, and he never let Jeffrey go; and eventually, Jeffrey returned.

I myself was baptized at age 30, along with Rob and our two children. And I really struggled with that decision. I’d been a Unitarian; and Unitarians think about God if they want, but they certainly don’t surrender themselves to him. I liked my life as a research chemist the way it was, and

I didn't want God messing with it. But eventually I agreed; we were all baptized as a family; and sure enough, the Holy Spirit poured through me like how the Nevada Falls thunders into Yosemite Valley in the springtime. And three years later I was in seminary to become a pastor.

Repenting and being baptized doesn't sound so very amazing. But I am here to tell you that that is a far greater miracle than the wind and the flame and the languages. All of which were temporary. God sent them to get people's attention, so that they would listen to what Peter had to say, and would agree to be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. That, then, would be permanent, and would change their lives. Speaking in foreign languages? That was temporary. Adding 3000 people to their number that day? Yeah, that was permanent.

Is there anyone here today who has not yet been baptized? Then, like Peter, I urge you to repent and be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. Come and talk with me, and we'll work out how that can happen.

Is there anyone here today who was baptized as an infant or a young child, when your parents promised to raise you to know and love Jesus? And now you'd like to reaffirm the baptismal vows made on your behalf, by your own choice? Then again, come and talk with me, and we'll work out how that can happen.

The church was started at Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago, and, astonishingly, is still here. Over the next few months we will be talking about what the church was like and what it can be like, since the Holy Spirit is still here and is still with us. We are ordinary folks in an ordinary place. But sometimes the ordinary is the greatest miracle of all. Amen.